

THE MASTER KEY

By John Fleming Wilson

CHAPTER XXI.

WHEN the chest was hove on deck, dripping with ocean slime, corroded and mysterious, Harry Wilkerson stared at it stupidly. His mind went back down the years to that night when Thomas Gallon—scheming for his little daughter—had drawn a plan by candlelight, to the quarrel, to his own desperate flight and escape.

And now he was about to see for the first time the fatal paper—to know the secret of the wealth of the "Master Key." He forgot his surroundings.

It was Jean Darnell who recalled him to the present. She leaned over



Thomas Gallon and His Little Daughter.

his shoulder as he knelt, and the perfume of her breath into his nostrils. He looked up, laughed and then ordered the box taken aft.

"I was dreaming," he said slowly. Then he looked at her directly, and she saw the flame in his eyes.

"Why dream when things are coming true?" she parried.

"I wonder whether they will all come true," he said moodily and followed the chest aft.

The curious sailors set the box down and waited. It was evident from their attitudes that they expected to see nothing less than great treasure. Otherwise, why this costly expedition?

But Wilkerson did not start immediately to open the chest. His very appearance seemed to bewilder him, and his hands shook. It was Jean Darnell who stirred him to activity.

"Now you've got it," she said impatiently. "Hurry and open it! The other launch is chasing us."

Wilkerson stared around and picked up a marlinpike. He began to pry at the lock. Mrs. Darnell angrily jerked at his shoulder.

"Harry, you fool, here is the key!" He took the article she handed him and nodded. "Sure enough," he assented, "we have the key! Funny I had forgot that."

With some difficulty he managed to clear the lock and insert the key. It turned with difficulty.

A moment later he had pried the lid back from its setting of rust and slime and they were all staring at the sudden contents.

There was no sound except the trundling of the swiftly revolving propeller and the heavy breathing of the sailors.

Suddenly Wilkerson swung round angrily and ordered everybody forward. Then he began his slow search.

Old jackets almost disintegrated by the action of water, pulpy papers and



Wilkerson Stared at It Stupidly.

various odds and ends came to his hand. The pulp he carefully laid aside as being possibly what he was looking

for.

"I'm afraid the plans are gone," Jean whispered.

"We must find them!" he snarled and went on with his task.

Halfway down he came upon a grotesque figure dripping with woody ooze. It stiffly stared up at him as he held it.

"An idol!" laughed Mrs. Darnell.

"Some sailor's curio. Well, go on. Idols don't talk."

An hour afterward Harry Wilkerson rose to his feet and kicked the scattered contents of the chest into the scuppers.

The idol rolled away and came to a stop upright against the bulwarks, when it presented glazed, mysterious eyes.

"No plans?" muttered Wilkerson with a curse.

"Only an idol!" laughed Jean in wild derision.

Then her handsome face flamed with wrath. She turned her back contemptuously on Wilkerson and stared across the water at the launch which was pursuing them.

In the bitterness of her heart was no mingling of pity for her tool; only self contempt that she had depended on him, helped him.

When she could control herself she went forward to get out of sight of the mocking heap of rubbish that had cost so much.

Presently a sailor made excuse to come aft and peered at the pile of junk. The idol caught his eye, and he stealthily caught it up and hid it in his shirt.

"Good in a pawnshop," he chuckled.

Thus once more the plans of the mother lode of the "Master Key" mine escaped from Wilkerson's fumbling fingers.

When the launch put into San Pedro Mrs. Darnell did not wait for Wilkerson.

"I'm going to Los Angeles," she said. "You'll find me at the hotel—if you think it worth your while."

He looked up from his business of settling with the divers and made a gesture to detain her. He seemed to call out some inarticulate plea.

She merely smiled again and left. She paid no attention to one of the sailors who brushed by her, clutching a concealed object beneath his jacket.

This individual, once clear of the water front, quickly made his way to a pawnbroker's shop, and the idol changed hands for a small sum after much haggling.

Before Wilkerson had settled with the diver John Dorr's launch also made its landing, and the two enemies would have met except that Wilkerson had to go to bank to cash a draft.

As he slipped away he saw the other boat and laughed bitterly. Dorr was welcome to what there was in the old chest.

"There is just one thing to do," John told the broken hearted Ruth, "and

that is to find out what Wilkerson did with what he got from your father's chest."

The captain of the other boat received them with a good humored grin and in answer to their inquiries pointed to the open box and the articles scattered on the deck.

"So far as I could make out," he went on, "there wasn't anything in the old chest worth the trouble of going after. At any rate Mr. Wilkerson and the lady seemed disappointed and put out."

"Didn't they take anything?" demanded Ruth, peering curiously at the moldy sea chest.

"Not a thing, so far as I could discover," was the reply. "In fact, I heard the two of them kind of quarreling, and the lady went off by herself."

The three of them stared down at the mementos of the long past tragedy, and then the captain suddenly clasped

thoughtfully. "You must have got some notion, Ruth. You were with her some time."

"Yes, I have an idea," she responded. "I'm not sure of all the details, but it seems Mrs. Darnell knew both father and Harry Wilkerson in the old days and—"

"And what?"

"Well," she went on, blushing divinely, "father didn't like Jean and wouldn't have anything to do with her nor allow me to either. She always hated father after that."

"Wilkerson is certainly in love with her," John said presently.

"I think he is," Ruth asserted. "But she doesn't care anything about him, I'm sure. All she is after is money."

Later in the evening as they discussed the events of the day John brought up the subject of Wilkerson's anxiety for the papers again and recalled the fact that old Tom Gallon had always insisted on Wilkerson's knowledge of something.

"I wonder just what it was," he went on. "If he knows just where that rich lode is he's concealed his knowledge pretty well, and the eagerness he is showing to get hold of the plans is proof that he isn't sure."

"He is spending lots of money," she sighed. "How much longer can we keep this up, John? Surely we are broke again?"

"Not so long as good old Everett sticks by us," was the response.

"But—maybe father was mistaken, and we can't pay it all back!"

"Nonsense!" he said reassuringly. "I can make the mine pay just as it stands. But I promised your father I'd see that you got all your rights, and he certainly meant for you to have the wealth hidden somewhere in the 'Master Key' mine."

"And we've lost the deeds and the key, and we haven't found the plans," she sighed.

"I'll find that Hindu and his precious idol if I have to go to India," he said promptly. "One thing—we won't have Harry Wilkerson spoiling our schemes. He'll give up now."

But Wilkerson had not given up. On his return from the bank he had learned from the launch captain of Dorr's

interest in the idol, and he had promptly followed this clue, with the result that he knew as much about its whereabouts as John and Ruth did, so far as its getting into the hands of an East Indian peddler was concerned.

Whether Dorr had recovered the image from him he did not know.

"What is that?" demanded John. "An old idol. But I'm sure neither of them took it."

"But what became of it?" John continued, trying to conceal his anxiety. "Maybe one of the men picked it up for a curio," the skipper said apologetically. "Everybody seemed to think the old thing was worthless, and you know a sailor will grab at just that kind of thing. Better ask some of the crew."

A few moments later Dorr had learned that that one of the sailors had indeed taken the image and gone uptown with it, apparently to sell it.

John thanked the captain, and when he and Ruth were out of earshot he said, "That idol is what we are after, Ruth."

"But where can we find it?" she mourned.

"We must trace the sailor. Ten to one he'll try to sell it to a second-hand man. Our best plan is to look into the pawnshops, I think, Ruth," he answered.

The first places they visited gave up no information of value. The third pawnbroker looked at Dorr curiously when he asked whether a man had been in to dispose of an idol.

"That thing seems to be wanted pretty much," he remarked. "But I bought it in good faith and sold it to a Hindu a little while after for a rug. Maybe you would like to buy a rug?"

They made it plain that rugs did not interest them and departed with the poor satisfaction of knowing that the object of their search was in the hands of an unknown wandering peddler of rugs, who was presumably an East Indian.

"We can't do any more just now," John told Ruth.

"No," was the response. "But I am going to keep an eye out for a Hindu rug seller. I don't imagine there are very many of them here, so it ought to be an easy matter to pick him up."

As they walked back to the hotel Ruth grew more cheerful. "At any rate, Wilkerson and Mrs. Darnell missed it," she remarked.

"I never understood just why that woman mixed herself up in this," John

had picked it up and taken it to a pawnshop and sold it."

She stamped her foot.

"Where is it? What has it to do with the plans?"

"I don't know where it is," he responded sulkily. "A Hindu rug peddler bought it."

"And Dorr bought it from him?"

"Not yet," he said, risking the statement. "Now all I have to do is to find Mr. Peddler and get it back."

Mrs. Darnell flung herself into a chair and laughed hysterically.

"You mean to tell me Tom Gallon hid his plans in a heathen idol and that we overlooked them and that a rug peddler has them now?"

She leaned forward, clinching her soft hands on her knees.

"Do you know all you have made me go through, Harry? Kidnaping, theft, murder—yes, murder—and at the end of it all, when we neither of us dare breathe for fear of the police finally getting us, you tell me that a tramp has got what we want! I'm done!"

Wilkerson had expected and feared this. He saw his wild efforts going for nothing. Without her assistance and her money he was helpless.

And profounder even than his hatred of Dorr and his desire for the hidden wealth was his agony at the thought of his failure to win this woman whom he loved.

Love is a noun which conveys to the ordinary mortal no definite meaning without an adjective. There is, indeed, an essence of love, a complete and all absorbing passion, before which even the gods bow and against which the world is powerless. Too often we must describe it as lawless.

Yet it also exists when it evokes the reverence of the most cynical. Wilkerson's love for Jean Darnell was the very essence of his being.

It had made a bravo of a coward and had welded a dozen strands of viciousness, weakness, wickedness and treacherousness into a strong character—strong only in its relation to the woman.

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CHAPTER XXII.

The Quest of the Hindu.

THAT night Wilkerson sought out Jean Darnell. She received him in a manner that told him distinctly that she was in a towering rage, though she was outwardly calm.

Wilkerson paid no attention apparently to her blazing eyes nor to her restrained, "Well, once more your schemes have failed."

"Not failed," he said boldly. "I admit we nearly passed up what we were looking for. Do you remember that idol that was in the chest?"

John stopped her nervous pacing of the floor and fixed her great, tawny eyes on Wilkerson.

"Harry," she said huskily, "I am weary of this."

"Wait a moment," he pleaded. "When I went back to the launch I found that Dorr had been quizzing the men about that image."

"And I suppose he had got it?"

"No, he didn't. One of the sailors

While these two were seeking for the strange image of an unknown god there was a third who had found in it the goal of his life's toil.

When God conceals himself from us in time of stress and agony, when he has closed his brazen heavens and our prayers die in the empty air it is his man to build for ourselves a tangible God, one whom we can see and feel, into whose face we can look and before whose feet we can lay our offerings and our petitions.

In a far city in India men had died of famine. The earth had turned to iron under their pious and the heavens to brass above them.

They had implored a hundred gods for help and made offerings at a thousand shrines. There had been no response. The smoke of the burning ghats by the side of the shrunken river told the sorry tale of prayer unanswered.

And in their last misery men turned, as men will, to one who dreamed. Reality was death. Dreams held out the promise of life.

And this dreamer, as do all who follow a vision, made his dream into a god.

People listened to his tale of a deity who was merciful to listen and powerful to save. They fed on the dreamer's words and called him a prophet.

Yet still the earth refused food, and the river shrank within its bed. Then they went to the prophet and called on him to save them and to call his god to their aid.

Like many prophets, he found himself forced to materialize his dream in order that the common folk might see and believe, for he had taught them that unless they believed there was no salvation.

"How can we believe in a god whom we cannot see?" they cried.

"I believe, though I do not see nor feel," he told them. But they were not satisfied and menaced him with death.

So he took mud and fire and made an image of his god and made a shrine for it and set the image in the shrine, where all might see and worship.

And the people prayed to this new god and laid offerings at his feet and

looked into his eyes and called upon him to save them, as his prophet had said he was able.

Thus, with the folk believing on the god of his vision, the prophet prayed also to the spirit of the deity, and the rains came from the hills, and the river rose, and the earth grew green.

When they had been saved and their stomachs were full the people went away and left the prophet alone with his god and his deserted shrine.

Yet always in time of trouble and stress they remembered the god who had saved them and returned to his worship, so that in season other prophets of him arose and erected a temple and taught the people to bring offerings at all times.

Thus the image became the image of the tutelary deity of the city and its river, with other images to do him homage and obey his commands.

"I'm going to get that idol,"

The past few weeks, with their woe, risk, crime and continual plotting, had made the Harry Wilkerson who was a weakling and sport of circumstances into a personality who must be dealt with.

John Darnell realized something of this when he next spoke.

"All this has been disappointing," he said quietly, his eyes burning steadily on hers. "But the more disappointments I have to overcome the more worth while it will make you."

"Quite an old time knight," she said scornfully, but with an effort.

"I am going to get that idol," he went on. "I know just two things—

There are millions in gold hidden in the 'Master Key' mine, and the plans are concealed in that image."

"When will you have them?" she cried, trying to fight against the man's evil power.

"Tomorrow," he returned.

"Even if Dorr and Ruth?"

He nodded gravely. She read the message in his eyes and shuddered. Wilkerson laughed. He had won. He had conquered not only the woman in that moment, but himself.

He was ready to do murder deliberately, without a qualm. There had been born in him another physical thirst—the blood lust.

He left immediately without uncovering his plans. He knew that the final victory would not be won until he could fill Jean Darnell's soft and avaricious palms with glittering gold, heaps of gold, gold that ran over, that spilled in luxuriant streams over her clenching fingers; gold that rang under her feet, that mounted like an enveloping flood about her till her flesh was bathed in it.

That night he paced the floor of his room, dreaming of gold and of blood.

So the next morning when John Dorr fared forth on his quest for the rug peddler Harry Wilkerson was not far behind him, watching his every move, studying him, trying to read what was in his mind. And all with the great question before him:

Had John Dorr the idol?

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